

## News focus

# Green light flickering for the UK's first GM crop

**Mediawatch:** Following field-scale trials, a leaked report suggests the British government is set to back the first commercial planting of a genetically modified crop. **Bernard Dixon** reports on the press's explosive response.

"GM crops to get go-ahead" *The Guardian* announced, above a page-one story based on papers leaked from a British cabinet committee. Yet the article itself, by environment correspondent Paul Brown, showed that the headline perpetuated a serious error that has bedevilled and fuelled discussion of genetically modified crops for several years.

The government had apparently resolved to allow the sowing not of GM plants in general but of one particular variety, a herbicide-resistant maize. Recent field-scale trials (*Curr. Biol.* 2003, 13, R853) had shown that, in contrast to two other GM crops, its cultivation was likely to promote biodiversity.

In other words, the UK government had adhered to a principle internationally agreed after intensive deliberation by expert committees at the very outset of genetic manipulation over a quarter of a century ago. GM organisms should not be adjudged as intrinsically dangerous — nor be absolved of all conceivable risk — as a category. They should be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

These considerations did not stop virtually the entire UK media from following up *The Guardian* story with reports that the government had given a green light for GM in general. Several

newspapers coupled their news coverage with editorials attacking Prime Minister Tony Blair for flying in the face of public opposition, just as he had done by joining the USA in going to war in Iraq. Taken together, the two decisions virtually signalled the death of democratic government in Britain.

The *Daily Mail* led the claque. "This latest charade is breathtaking in its cynicism and a deeply depressing reflection of just how meaningless democracy has become," said its editorial. "In thrall to President Bush and America's GM conglomerates, Mr Blair is ignoring potential threats to human health and the environment."

Commentator Geoffrey Lean claimed that "the US administration has close connections with Monsanto and

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# The Guardian

## NHS inquiry after dismembered body found

Psychiatric patient newly released from hospital in police custody after being discovered at scene of brutal killing

Rosie Cowan  
and John Carvel

The NHS launched a serious incident inquiry last night after a psychiatric patient released from a London mental hospital was found hours later in a flat in which a man had been brutally killed.

Managers at East London and City mental health trust were investigating how the patient came to be discharged from one of its hospitals. The patient was in police custody

last night having been arrested on Tuesday evening in north London. That morning he left a mental ward where he had been a voluntary patient.

The victim, a man in his 40s also believed to be a former psychiatric patient, had been hacked to death. A police spokeswoman said he had suffered "multiple injuries, including some dismemberment".

One leg had been severed from his body and his head cracked open with a blunt in-

strument. There was also the possibility that some of the body had been cooked — parts of what is believed to be human tissue were found by police frying in a pan.

Forensic experts are testing items, including possible weapons, recovered from the scene. Detectives from Scotland Yard's serious crime directorate are investigating.

Mental health campaigners have expressed doubts about the adequacy of discharge procedures. Marjorie Wallace,

chief executive of the mental health charity Sane, said there were about 50 homicides a year by people in contact with mental health services because they had a mental illness or disorder or both.

Police were called to the north London flat at 7.40pm on Tuesday. A post mortem examination was being carried out last night.

Under NHS guidelines, patients with a severe mental illness should have a care plan agreed on discharge from

hospital, setting out the care and rehabilitation to be provided, identifying the NHS or social services worker coordinating that care, and specifying what action should be taken in a crisis.

The guidelines are less rigorous for voluntary patients than those sectioned under the Mental Health Act.

Ms Wallace said the charity was aware of many cases where patients were allowed to walk off psychiatric wards after threatening suicide or

harm to others without after-care arrangements being put in place.

In a study of 65 homicides involving psychiatric patients over two years, the charity found 90% involved a breakdown of communication between the key agencies responsible for the patient's care.

In 88% there was a breakdown of the care plan or absence of one. In 83% there was poor record keeping and/or incomplete case histories. In 75% there was

lack of an adequate risk assessment and in 75% the victim was known to the perpetrator.

Ms Wallace said: "We have come across far too many cases of people allowed to walk off psychiatric wards despite the fact that they threatened suicide or harm to others. In our experience very little effort is made to detain them or make sure they are going back to a home where they will not be alone and unsupervised."

"Too many leave without commonsense safeguards. The most dangerous time for suicide and homicide is the first 10 days," she said.

The East London and City mental health trust said: "We can confirm a patient known to our services has been arrested by the police but we are unable to provide any further information at the moment."

● A 34-year-old man is expected to appear at Waltham Forest magistrates court this morning charged with the murder of a 45-year-old man.

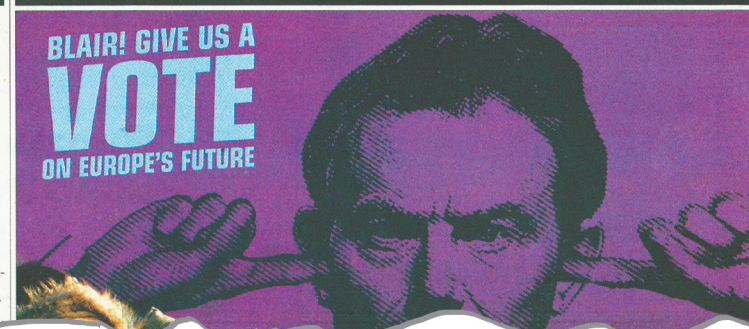
## GM crops to get go-ahead

Exclusive Leaked papers reveal decision

Paul Brown

MPs would be encouraged to speak out. The

did the debate



**Out of the bag:** Leaked papers from a British government cabinet meeting last month suggest approval is likely for the first commercial planting of a genetically modified crop in the country.

other biotech companies and Bush has not hidden his fury at Europe's refusal to import American GM food. He expects Mr Blair's unthinking support...Top officials privately admit the overriding considerations in reaching the decision were to avoid handing a victory to environmentalists and critical newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, to avoid displeasing President Bush — and to save Mr Blair from embarrassment."

There was space too (in a total of four whole pages headed "Frankenstein Foods - the Great Betrayal") for political commentator Simon Heffer to attack "totalitarian Tony". The Prime Minister had shown "blistering contempt" for "ordinary men and women [who] are deeply uneasy about the effect of GM crops on their health and the environment".

Likewise, the *Daily Mirror* accused the government of deciding to sow "Frankenstein" crops despite public alarm. Campaigners had branded the decision "a great tragedy for consumers and the environment, and a victory for profiteering by biotech giants," said deputy political editor Oonagh Blackman.

According to the *Daily Express*, the move was likely to trigger mass civil disobedience, with at least one environmental group already vowing to uproot GM crops. Under a headline about Blair "treating the public with contempt", environment editor John Ingham reported accusations of the government "bowing to big business" and "planning a propaganda offensive by getting pro-GM members of parliament to persuade people of the benefits of GM technology."

Several newspapers referred to a Cabinet Office report last year which said that GM crops were unlikely to bring any economic benefits for the UK at the moment. However, journalists failed to remind readers that this conclusion was not based on any inherent problem or deficiency of GM plants. It simply reflected the reality that farmers and food suppliers would be unable to sell them to consumers who rejected

GM products, for whatever reason.

Risible in their confusion were the efforts of several newspapers to help readers understand the complexities of the subject. "What is a GM crop?" asked the London *Evening Standard*. "Answer: GM crops have had genes added in the laboratory, giving them resistance to certain types of pesticide."

This was not a simple slip — the substitution of "pesticide" when "herbicide" was intended. For the answer went on: "Farmers can spray pesticide on fields planted with GM crops to kill weeds and other pests."

"Why do we need them?" the guide continued. "Answer: GM crops would make farming easier, as pesticides could be used more widely." Is it really too much to ask the *Evening Standard* to understand that the whole point of putting insecticidal toxin genes into crops is to *reduce* pesticide use?

It was left to *The Daily Telegraph* to enter a note of

caution over the leak that triggered this torrent of anger and misinformation. "Tony Blair is still not convinced that GM crops should be commercialised, despite leaked Cabinet minutes suggesting imminent approval for GM maize," wrote farming correspondent Robert Uhlig. "Senior figures in the biotechnology industry and groups opposing GM crops... suspected that the minutes were leaked to *The Guardian* to further the cause of an 'old guard' in Whitehall in favour of promoting biotechnology."

Uhlig reported that, at a recent meeting of the Soil Association, which promotes organic farming, Blair had insisted he had not yet made up his mind whether to approve GM crops. "Patrick Holden, director of the Soil Association, said yesterday: 'The Prime Minister was at great pains to stress that he has an open mind about it. He is very concerned about taking on public opinion, particularly after Iraq.'"

Watch this space.

## Red queen running on gene technologies

The German government passed a new law on non-human genetic technologies that regulates co-existence of GM and non-GM crops, reports **Michael Gross**.

The German 'Bio-Bauer' or eco-farmer may be a rare species, but these hardy few holding out against any invasion of modern agrochemicals and pesticides must always be on the mind of Renate Künast, the German minister for agriculture and consumer affairs. For Künast is one of the three cabinet members of the Green Party, and organic farming is part of the green bedrock on which this party was founded in the late seventies, the greenest of all green issues. Having given up on most of the other principles of the early days, the party cannot afford to abandon this last justification for its name.

So what is a green minister to do, once the unofficial European Union moratorium, which has so

far stemmed the pressure of companies to allow further GM crops and products into Europe, comes to an end? To balance the interests involved and implement the directives of the European Union, a simple patch added to the existing 1990

"Gentechnikgesetz" (gene technology law) would not do. Künast's ministry had to come up with a major overhaul of the outdated law which covers all genetic manipulation of non-human organisms (but excludes the issues of human reproductive genetics, stem cells, etc. which are covered by different laws). The resulting proposal detailing the changes, after feedback from the other ministers involved and approval of the cabinet has swollen to a document of 75